FFR

SARDINES
Nutrition Facts
8 servings per container
Serving size
1.5 Sardine (55g)
Calories per serving 80
Nutrition Facts
8 servings per container
Serving size
1.5 Sardine (55g)
Calories per serving

Issue № 155: The Harrowing Life Cycle of the Ingrown Toenail in Three Volumes

Fowl Feathered Review is a quarterly, a disordered artifact of the human impulse to categorize and consume the ephemeral. Produced by the Springwound Mammoth Pancake Coalition–an entity distinct from its waffle-centric counterpart–it is birthed under the Fowlpox Press imprint. Virgil Kay, its editor, presides over this enterprise from a paper canoe adrift on the Passagassawakeag, a river of dubious depth and even more dubious inhabitants. Surrounded by featherheads and their aquatic card games, Kay's reign is absolute, his word the final arbiter in the transformation of boastful souls into doormats. Layout and visual conceits are the province of Cookie Granola, while melodrama and histrionics fall under the purview of Childe Harold. Silent Bill, in his characteristically taciturn manner, provides necessary pauses. The review's structural integrity, or lack thereof, is the domain of Unkie Bob, whose talents extend to the mitigation of typographical errors and the prevention of electrical conflagrations. Everett Enótita serves as Kay's indispensable amanuensis, and the Ecum Secum Literary Brain Trust, in a gesture of dubious beneficence, offers nominal financial support. Printed upon the verdant expanse of Bald Porcupine Island, and laced with the enigmatic Kraa, a bioengineered culinary enigma, the Fowl Feathered Review remains a testament to human ingenuity, or perhaps merely a symptom of cultural decline. ISSN: 1929-7238.

"I am an observer of life, a non-participant who takes no sides. I am in the regimented society, but not of it."

--Moondog, The Viking of 6th Avenue

Return Policy:
If this magazine does not meet your expectations, please return it to us in its original condition for a full refund, minus the cost of enlightenment.

Submissions

Fowlpox Press: A Submission Guide for the Determined (or Deluded)
To the Aspiring Artist (or Sandwich Enthusiast):

1. **Craft (or Culinary Construct):** 2-227 poems, a numerical range that hints at both ambition and a troubling lack of self-editing, may find their way to our digital doorstep (fowlpoxpress@mail2poet.com). Alternatively, for the visually inclined, paintings numbered 2-953 (a prolific career, or perhaps a basement overflowing with forgotten canvases?) are welcome. We are also, inexplicably, open to submissions of twelve-inch sandwiches.
2. **The Gatekeeper:** Address your offerings to Virgil Kay, Editor. In posession of remarkably discerning taste, or so he believes, Virgil is a rooster of some renown, a creature of instinct and inexplicable confidence. His title, "China Wok Habitue," suggests a broader palate than one might expect from a bird, though it's more likely a testament to the local takeout joint's generous portions. (**Please note:** Include a bio, a desperate plea for recognition that will likely join the unread masses in the digital purgatory of our slush pile.)
3. **Format:** Poems, those valiant attempts at capturing the human experience in meter and rhyme, should be attached in a Word document or PDF. Paintings, windows into your soul (or a weekend spent with Bob Ross reruns), must be submitted in JPEG, TIFF, or a format our aging technology can comprehend. Jokes, if they exist, should be delivered in MP3 format. We are, alas, not equipped to handle the nuanced art of the live performance. Sandwiches, a curious offering in the realm of artistic expression, require clear plastic wrapping and a small packet of Kewpie Mayonnaise. (**Pro-tip:** The Kewpie packaging is, undeniably, a work of art in its own right, and we encourage you to admire it before consumption.)
4. **The Cycle Continues:** We exist in a perpetual state of acceptance and rejection. A Sisyphean task, some might say. We receive submissions 365 days a year, a testament to the relentless hope, or perhaps blissful ignorance, of aspiring artists. However, with a heavy heart (and a full crop), we must inform you that rejections also occur 365 days a year.
5. **The Sandwiches:** Ah, the sandwiches. These, unlike your artistic endeavors, find a permanent home within our editorial sanctum. Virgil, in his infinite wisdom, has determined that a diet rich in carbohydrates is essential for maintaining his regal demeanor.
6. **Leap Year Follies:** Leap years, those extra days gifted by the whims of the calendar, offer no reprieve. Aspiring poets, it seems, are undeterred by such temporal anomalies. You are, however, cordially invited to "take a flying leap" during these additional 24 hours.

Please proceed with caution. Artistic aspirations are a delicate dance, and the path to publication is littered with the fallen hopes of countless dreamers. But hey, maybe your sandwich is killer. Just remember, Kewpie or bust.

Fowl Feathered Review | Poets & Writers (pw.org)

"Non ignora mali, miseris succurrere disco."

— Virgil, The Aeneid

The Tsar's Tchotchke and the Case of the Crummy Cookie: A Hairdresser's Tale (Blazing Edition)

As told by Viktor, your hairdresser, while fitting you for $5,000 hair extensions on Melrose Avenue, Los Angeles. Outside, Fire #47 of the week rages across the hills, painting the sky a shade Pantone might call "Post-Apocalyptic Ember." You're not sure if the acrid smell is wildfire smoke or the keratin treatment, but you've resigned yourself to smelling like scorched almonds for the foreseeable future. Welcome to LA—a place where the world burns, but the hair always slays.

"Darling, sit back. Relax. Let Viktor whisk you away to a tale of passion, betrayal, bureaucracy, and—naturally—cookies. You're getting the *Benny Barsukov Special* today: voluminous, chaotic, but somehow still perfection. Much like Benny himself.

"Now, picture this: Apple Creek, Ohio. A charming town if you like your charm served with a side of insanity. Benny was born there, poor soul. Benny, my muse, my inspiration, my walking cautionary tale. He's the kind of man who could trip over a crack in the sidewalk and land in a three-ring circus—where he'd promptly be sued by the ringmaster for intellectual property theft.

“Take his brother Larry. Ugh, Larry. A man whose personality could sour milk faster than the Ohio humidity. Larry sued Benny over a cookie recipe. Not just any cookie recipe, mind you. Aunt Mildred’s Sacred Butter Bombs—cookies so decadent they could make a vegan weep. Or maybe that’s just the cholesterol count. Either way, people in Apple Creek treat these cookies like the Dead Sea Scrolls, but with more butter and fewer theological implications.

“Hold still, darling, while I blend. These extensions require precision. Where was I? Oh yes—the courtroom. A spectacle. Benny versus Larry, the Butter Bomb Battle Royale. The bailiff tap-danced. Mrs. Higgins, the local squirrel whisperer, testified under oath that the recipe contained “a hint of treachery.” Mr. Johnson, the self-proclaimed town historian, embarked on a monologue about the Mesopotamian origins of taxation and biscotti, which Judge Perkins allowed, for reasons I can only assume involved blackmail or boredom.

“And Larry—Larry, with his tie that looked like it had been exhumed from a 1970s-yard sale—claimed Benny stole the recipe out of spite. Spite! Benny wouldn't know spite if it came gift-wrapped with a bow. He’s an artist, a dreamer, a man who once bought a ceramic lawn gnome because he thought it “looked lonely.” But Larry? Larry’s the kind of man who’d sell his own shadow if he could monetize its shade.

“Then, as if the circus wasn’t enough, Benny gets a package. A cheap plastic replica of the Order of Vladimir—yes, darling, the Russian medal. Why? No one knows. Benny, bless his delusional heart, thinks it’s the key to his destiny. Spoiler alert: It’s not. It’s a tchotchke from eBay, probably shipped from a warehouse in New Jersey. But Benny, ever the optimist, sees it as a sign. A calling. A cosmic breadcrumb leading him directly into—wait for it—a conspiracy.

“Oh, darling, I’m layering these extensions so seamlessly, you’ll look like you stepped out of a Fellini film. Now, back to the story. Benny decides to visit the Apple Creek Department of Forgotten Medals. A Kafkaesque nightmare if I’ve ever heard of one. Picture it: fluorescent lights buzzing like a thousand anxious bees, filing cabinets

crammed with forms no one's looked at since the Eisenhower administration, and at the helm, Larry—the self-appointed king of this gray, bureaucratic kingdom.

"But the plot thickens! Turns out the Order of Vladimir isn't just a cheap bauble. Oh no. It's a cryptographic key to a global conspiracy involving Russian spies, American intelligence, and, inexplicably, the Apple Creek Homeowners Association. Why is the HOA involved? Darling, if I could explain the HOA, I'd be running for president.

"Meanwhile, Benny's nephew Billy, sweet boy, is out there spreading joy with candy bars. While the adults are locked in a slapstick melee over cookies and medals, Billy's out there reminding us that life is about giving, not getting. A lesson, by the way, that completely escapes the adults, because let's face it—adults are the worst.

"Now, let's talk about the courtroom finale. Picture it: Benny and Larry in a slapstick fistfight that would've made Buster Keaton proud. Judge Perkins twirling his gavel like a baton. The bailiff attempting a pirouette and falling into the jury box. And in the eye of this storm, Benny has an epiphany. Life is absurd. Gloriously, unapologetically absurd. You can fight it, or you can laugh at it. And maybe, if you're Benny, you can bake cookies in the shape of the Order of Vladimir and sell them at a farmer's market for $12 a dozen. Because why not?

"Alright, darling, I'm just adding the finishing touches. You're going to look like a starlet who's survived a slapstick fistfight and emerged victorious.

"So, what's the moral of the story? Embrace the madness. Laugh at the absurdity. And if someone sues you over a cookie recipe, bake them a cake shaped like a turd and call it a day.

"Oh, and if you ever find yourself in Apple Creek, avoid the squirrels. They're organized, they're angry, and I'm fairly certain they're working with the HOA."

Viktor steps back, admiring his work. The fire outside still rages, but inside the salon, all is calm. Your hair is perfect—voluminous, chaotic, but somehow flawless. You glance in the mirror and realize Viktor isn't just a hairdresser. He's a prophet of the absurd. Life is ridiculous, but at least you look fabulous.

"That'll be $5,000, darling. Cash or card?"

The Ontological Predicament of Equine Existentialism: A Suburban Nocturne

By Marty Dasein

Every night, under a Vermont sky so dark it resembled the absolute negation of celestial cartography, 12-year-old Jasper T. Wainwright III (he added the "III" himself for gravitas) would sneak out of his house. His widowed mother, a woman who had perfected the art of sighing with such metaphysical depth it could deconstruct the very concept of maternal resignation, was usually asleep by 9:30 PM.

Jasper, however, had a secret life—one that involved a barn, an old horse named Mr. Edgelord, and a profound sense of existential fulfillment that could only be understood through the lens of pre-adolescent phenomenological exploration.

Mr. Edgelord—a being whose epistemological framework encompassed the Heideggerian concept of *Dasein* with such profound complexity that he could deconstruct the phenomenological boundaries of equine consciousness, parsing the intricate semiotics of pastoral existence, navigating the liminal spaces between pure being and phenomenological perception, interrogating the very nature of equine subjectivity through a series of increasingly baroque philosophical ruminations that traversed the boundaries of linguistic representation, challenged the fundamental assumptions of mammalian cognition, and reimagined the ontological status of non-human consciousness—was, in short, a horse.

As Jasper sat atop Mr. Edgelord, pontificating on the dialectical relationship between condiment preferences, his phone buzzed. The ringtone—*"Please Don't Tell My Father That I Used His 1996 Honda Accord to Destroy the Town Of Willow Grove, Pennsylvania In 2002"* by Pet Symmetry—blared through the barn like a Brechtian intervention of sonic

irony. Startled, Jasper tumbled off Mr. Edgelord and into a pile of manure that had accumulated like a postmodern monument to rural entropy.

"Ugh, why does this always happen to me?" Jasper muttered, wiping manure off his jeans. He slid out of the barn, his sneakers squelching with an existential rhythm, and checked his phone. The call was from a pharmacy in Pennsylvania—a geographical signifier that seemed to collapse the boundaries between coincidence and cosmic joke.

Sneaking back into the house, his sneakers leaving faint brown streaks that could be interpreted as a metaphorical critique of bourgeois domesticity, Jasper encountered his mother in the kitchen. She stood there, arms crossed, her expression a complex semiotics of maternal concern and olfactory displeasure.

"Jasper," she said, her voice a carefully modulated instrument of parental interrogation, "why do your sneakers smell like... manure?"

Jasper froze, considered the ontological implications of potential fabrication, then burst into laughter—a sound that simultaneously acknowledged the absurdity of existence and celebrated its ineffable beauty.

"Mom," he said between giggles, "you wouldn't believe me if I told you."

She raised an eyebrow—a gesture that contained more philosophical complexity than most doctoral dissertations.

"Try me."

Jasper told her everything. About Mr. Edgelord, the ringtone, the call from Pennsylvania, the manure. His words tumbled out like a stream of consciousness that would make James Joyce proud. And when he finished, his mother did something unexpected: she laughed. It was a laugh that deconstructed years of silent grief, a sonic explosion of pure, unadulterated human connection.

"Jasper," she said, wiping tears of mirth, "you're a strange kid. But I love you."

The next day, a text arrived from the Pennsylvania pharmacy: *"Your prescription is ready for pickup."* Jasper, who had never been to Pennsylvania and certainly didn't have a prescription, decided to frame the text—a ready-made art piece that challenged the very notion of administrative meaning.

Life, Jasper realized, was a complex negotiation between the absurd and the beautiful, a continuous performance of becoming that defied simple categorization. The manure on his sneakers was not a stain, but a badge of existential honor.

Lactose at Lightspeed (No Spoilers)

By Jayden Albrecht

I sit in the faded armchair of an almost-now café,
Adjusting the chronometer
For precisely three minutes and 19 seconds
Before the chocolate milk's expiration date–
That lemony whiff of possibly sour destiny.

I yearn to be back there,
In the fluorescent-lit corridors
With the smell of antiseptic hope and
Rubber floor squeaks echoing
Beneath the shuffle of my uncertain legs.

She stands poised with gentle hands,
My therapist–self-assured, ephemeral–
As I proffer the humble carton.
An offering of improbable devotion,
A lurch toward the nexus of connection
Out of a thick swirl of heartbreak and dread.

Time's unkind arrow, though–milk grows warm,
Dignity sours in the gut:
I tip the carton too far,
The universe aligning with comedic chaos
Worthy of a Goon Show interlude–
And I retch forth
An unstoppable fountain of regrets

All over her new scrubs.

Her recoil is immediate and unstoppable,
Like a Hatfield and the North jazz break–
She disappears in the swirl of half-formed chords,
Her silhouette dissolving from my horizon.
In that instant, I feel the throbbing emptiness
That emerges
When human connection breaks.

Now I linger in the echo chamber of my own missteps,
Footfalls unsupported,
My battered car-accident knees soft like whipped cream
Too long in the sun.
I hobble, unsteady, alone,
Missing her rhythmic encouragement
Through echoing halls that reek of disinfectant.

No do-overs remain for me:
I misread the expiration date
On my unsaid apologies.
I nurse the memory of how her smile
Once promised a kinder tomorrow.
And the café seat remains vacant,
Folding time around unclaimed cups
Of sweet, fleeting possibility.

The Cholesterol Cruiser Chronicles: An Experimental Edition

By Romain Syrena

The waiting room in Dr. Feldman's office resembled a shrine to automotive anthropomorphism. Pixar's *Cars* characters, their oversized headlights gleaming with unsettling zeal, adorned the walls like judgmental deities. I felt their gaze keenly, as if they were privy to the ongoing negotiation between my LDL levels and my fervent love affair with all things fried.*[1] Above the receptionist's desk, a radio wheezed, then, as if by cosmic decree, launched into the opening riff of *"Cars"* by The Cars. In this space, the song felt less like a coincidence and more like an ominous pronouncement.

Behind me, the receptionist sighed. Her air suggested a soul once destined for poetic expression, now trapped in an endless loop of explaining insurance co-pays to individuals who considered deductibles mere suggestions. I fixated on a laminated poster depicting a grinning tomato, its message, *"Eat Your Colors!"* ringing hollow in the face of my saturated-fat-fueled existence.

Dr. Feldman emerged, her white coat billowing behind her like a character in a medical drama no one watches anymore.*[2] "Your cholesterol's not stellar," she announced, settling across from me with the practiced air of one delivering bad news in easily digestible portions. "But—"

And then, she paused, her gaze drifting towards the window behind me, much like a dog mid-fetch might suddenly become captivated by a squirrel. I followed her line of sight and beheld the neighboring used car lot, where ten automotive testaments to questionable life choices and even more questionable repair work were being unloaded from a flatbed truck.

Dr. Feldman's eyes narrowed, a flicker of something akin to religious fervor igniting within them. "A 1978 AMC Pacer," she breathed, her voice hushed with reverence, as if she had just spotted a rare species of avian wonder.*[3]

The Pacer, a shade of avocado green that hinted at past culinary indiscretions, sat amidst its fellow automotive misfits in the lot's infamous "$2,500 Pile." This weekly ritual, the Tuesday arrival of vehicular castaways, was a local phenomenon, each vehicle boasting a title-in-hand and exactly one coat of wax.

"After your appointment," Dr. Feldman declared, her professional facade crumbling faster than a poorly baked soufflé, "we are going to examine that Pacer."

(The Great Escape and the Genesis of *The Cholesterol Cruiser*)

There was, however, a slight complication. The elevator, as per its usual routine, had succumbed to the relentless forces of entropy, and the stairs were barricaded for resurfacing with something that smelled suspiciously of citrus and despair. Our only avenue of escape was the window, and Dr. Feldman, revealing a latent action-hero complex, took the lead, clipboard clutched firmly in hand, and launched herself onto the fire escape.

The used car lot exuded the ambiance of a post-apocalyptic bazaar. Dust devils danced in the February sunlight as Dr. Feldman practically levitated towards the Pacer, murmuring sweet nothings about its "unappreciated legacy." I, meanwhile, found myself inexplicably drawn to a PT Cruiser–judge me if you must–which, despite its reputation as the automotive equivalent of a mullet, possessed an interior as pristine as a freshly laundered conscience and a color best described as "beige that gave up."*[4]

But destiny, that fickle mistress, had other plans.

Concealed behind a dilapidated barn at the edge of the lot, something shimmered. It wasn't a car. It was a houseboat–if one could charitably bestow the term "boat" upon a waterlogged contraption adorned with peeling paint and a roof exhibiting a distinct sag.

It resembled something Hemingway might have abandoned during a particularly brutal hangover.

Dr. Feldman appeared beside me, her eyes gleaming with the manic energy that only the discovery of a new obsession can ignite. "We must acquire it," she proclaimed, as if this were the most logical conclusion to our day.

And then, because the universe operates according to its own peculiar brand of logic, Nurse Mildred, her scrubs flapping like battle flags in the breeze, materialized in the lot. "Dr. Feldman! Mrs. Higgins is coding in exam room two! And Mr. Henderson just arrived with a live badger!"

"Inform Mrs. Higgins to persevere," Dr. Feldman retorted. "I am engaged in a matter of considerable import!"

Right there, amidst the swirling dust and the automotive chaos, we forged a pact. Four hundred dollars a month, divided evenly over sixteen months. The houseboat–gloriously, ridiculously christened *The Cholesterol Cruiser*–would be ours.

And then, because life delights in exceeding the bounds of fiction, we got married. The justice of the peace, who happened to be waiting for his own appointment, officiated the ceremony in the parking lot, using a receipt from the PT Cruiser as our makeshift marriage license.

(Honeymoon on the High...ish Seas)

Our honeymoon, naturally, unfolded on the houseboat. We spent a fortnight meandering along the Penobscot River, conveniently close to Old Town, Maine, towing the Pacer (*The Avocado*) and the PT Cruiser (*The Blandmobile*) behind us like a pair of loyal, if somewhat eccentric, canine companions. It wasn't glamorous, but it was perfect in the way that only truly absurd decisions can be.*[5]

We fished (with minimal success). We engaged in spirited debates about the merits of guacamole (I maintain it is overrated). We played *"Cars"* by The Cars on repeat until the radio, in an act of self-preservation, short-circuited. And, in a burst of inspiration fueled

by cheap wine and river water, we decided to stage impromptu performances of Maurice Maeterlinck's plays (discovered, naturally, in a dusty box on the houseboat) for the bewildered occupants of passing fishing boats and canoes. Dr. Feldman, channeling her inner Sarah Bernhardt, embraced the role of Mélisande with an intensity that bordered on the alarming, while I, with considerably less enthusiasm, mumbled my way through Pelléas' lines, occasionally pausing to swat at mosquitoes the size of small birds. Our audience, I suspect, was less than captivated, but the herons seemed to appreciate our efforts. Or, at the very least, they didn't flee.

And in those moments—on that ramshackle houseboat, with our absurdly overpriced vehicles parked on shore—I experienced a profound realization: life isn't about optimal cholesterol levels or prudent choices. It's about finding someone who will buy a sinking boat with you and laugh as it takes on water, someone who will perform bad theater with you on a river in Maine.

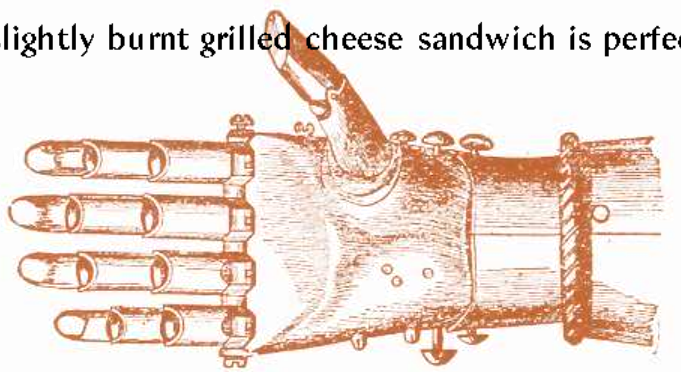
*[1] The anthropomorphic tendencies of modern society are truly alarming. I suspect my toaster is judging my bread choices as well.

*[2] Though, if I'm being honest, I'd probably watch a medical drama about a doctor who moonlights as a vintage car enthusiast. It has potential.

*[3] The Pacer, a vehicle so misunderstood, so maligned. It's the Rodney Dangerfield of the automotive world. It gets no respect.

*[4] Beige that gave up. I think I dated someone like that once.

*[5] Perfect in the way that a slightly burnt grilled cheese sandwich is perfect. Imperfect, but satisfying, nonetheless.



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2 Poems by Maria Rohde

Life After Biopsy

Q: Where do you live?
A: They didn't shovel the patio.
Q. What are you watching?
A: They booed Hulk Hogan.
Q: What are you reading?
A: Werner Herzog's parents were members of the Nazi party.
Q: What are you eating?
A: They had One American News on in the restaurant.
Q: Where do you work?
A: They hung up a tablecloth as a banner.
Q: What are you doing after this?
A: Taking an Epsom salt bath.

Life After a Big Bad Thing

Q: Where do you live?
A: Film cost $5.50 for 10 exposures.
Q: What are you watching?
A: Khloé is off the market.
Q: What are you reading?
A: Diane Arbus photographed NYC so Harriet M. Welsch could spy on it.
Q: What are you wearing?
A: OBEY.
Q: What are you eating?
A: They served cold coffee in a hot cup.
Q: Where do you work?
A: We have high fantasy; someone else has a large red dog.
Q: What are you doing after this?
A: Joining S.C.U.M.

The Ballad of Benny "B-Rad" Radburn & the Garden State Grind

(A Modern Ipuwer Papyrus Adaptation, Reimagined as a Culinary Catastrophe with Existential Sprinkles)

By Danger Dragon Hot Rod Ratbat

1. Lamentations of a Line Cook (Revised and Slightly Less Believable)

The Wawa weepeth, possibly from excessive onion topping. The pork roll, a culinary paradox wrapped in mystery meat, is petrified, perhaps by the sheer weight of its own contradictions. Benny "B-Rad" Radburn, late of Exit 8A, a geographical anomaly masquerading as an existential crossroads, lamenteth, which is to say, he mumbles a lot while staring into the abyss of the coffee machine. His apron, a Jackson Pollock of grease stains and philosophical despair, hangs heavy, like a wet metaphor. "The bagels," he cries, or rather, suggests in a tone barely audible above the hum of the industrial refrigerator, "they are become stale! The Taylor Ham, it hath lost its tang! Where is the joy in a Jersey breakfast, anyway? It's always been a bit of a gamble."

His coworker, Brenda from Secaucus, a woman who views life through the prism of a particularly unflattering fluorescent light, sighs a sigh that could deflate a blimp. "B-Rad," she says, her voice the aural equivalent of beige wallpaper, "you're always so dramatic. It's just a Tuesday. Or maybe Wednesday. Time has lost all meaning here."

But B-Rad, a man who once attempted to alphabetize the condiments, sees the signs. The Turnpike traffic, a writhing beast of metal and frustration, a perpetually stalled metaphor for the human condition, mirrors the chaos in his soul, a soul apparently

furnished with mismatched IKEA parts. The McMansions of Morris County, those architectural expressions of existential emptiness, once symbols of aspirational bliss, now mock him with their sterile grandeur, like a chorus line of smug, beige boxes. Even the boardwalk, usually a riot of salt-laced laughter and questionable hygiene, is eerily silent, save for the mournful cries of gulls scavenging for dropped fries, which, B-Rad suspects, are whispering secrets of cosmic indifference. "I had my fortune told by a seagull once," B-Rad muttered, "it wasn't very optimistic."

II. The State of Disunion (or, Why I'm Thinking of Relocating to Lichtenstein)

The news on the deli's crackling radio, a device that seems to operate solely on static and outdated political pronouncements, tells a grim tale, possibly fabricated by a squirrel. The Pine Barrens are burning, choked by a developer's hubris, a hubris that apparently can be measured in square footage. The Raritan River, once teeming with life, now whispers tales of industrial runoff, a whispered conversation best avoided. Even the sacred Springsteenian parking lot at the Stone Pony, a space where dreams were once parked illegally, is now a condo complex, a concrete testament to the impermanence of everything, including dreams.

"The movers and shakers," B-Rad mutters, a phrase that now serves as a sort of personal mantra, "they feast on our dreams like seagulls on spilled funnel cake. Which, incidentally, is a disturbing image. They promise us 'Stronger Together,' which sounds vaguely threatening, but all I see is 'Strife and Tethered,' which is probably just a typo, but an evocative one nonetheless."

Brenda, ever pragmatic, a quality B-Rad finds both admirable and deeply irritating, counters, "Look, B-Rad, you gotta chill. This ain't the end of the world. Though, I've often wondered, if it *were* the end of the world, would we even notice, working here?"

But B-Rad knows better. He sees the vacant stares in the eyes of the commuters, the people trapped in a never-ending game of automotive sardines, the desperation in the scratch-off lottery tickets clutched in their hands, the tiny, flimsy flags of hope waving

in the face of overwhelming odds. The Garden State, once a vibrant tapestry of cultures and dreams, a description lifted directly from a tourism brochure, is unraveling thread by thread, like a poorly knitted existential sweater.

III. The Whispers of Change (or, a Book, a Slushy Machine, and the Epiphany That Wasn't Entirely Fulfilling)

One night, while closing up, a task that feels vaguely apocalyptic in its loneliness, B-Rad finds a discarded library book tucked behind the slushy machine, a literary oasis amidst the frozen sugar water. It's a collection of poems by local Jersey writers, voices he'd never heard before, mostly because he never looked. They speak of forgotten diners, of the ghosts of factory towns, of the quiet resilience of the people, which, when you think about it, is mostly just exhaustion.

He reads late into the night, the words resonating deep within him, or at least making a faint buzzing sound. He discovers the raw beauty in the decay, a concept that sounds better in poetry than it actually feels, the hidden strength in the ordinary, which is probably just clever marketing. He sees the irony in the state motto: Liberty and Prosperity. For whom? A question he suspects was rhetorical.

IV. A New Dawn (Sort Of, with a Side of Ambiguity)

B-Rad starts writing. The kind of writing that involves thinking, then writing, then realizing that thinking beforehand was a crucial part of the operation. He writes about the chipped Formica counters of his childhood diner, the kind of Formica that seems to absorb memories, the smell of his grandmother's Sunday gravy, a scent that could induce Proustian flashbacks in even the most jaded palate, the symphony of cicadas on a summer night, a sound that is both haunting and slightly annoying. He writes about the quiet dignity of the sanitation workers, the unsung heroes of the existential drama, the weary wisdom of the bodega owners, who have probably seen it all, twice, the vibrant pulse of the late-night taquerias, which are a testament to the fact that even at 3 AM, people crave tacos.

His writing isn't polished, it's raw, like a particularly undercooked steak, but it's real, like the pain of stubbing your toe on a existential conundrum. It's the taste of a perfect saltwater taffy, a fleeting moment of sweetness in a world of brine, the sting of a Jersey Shore sunburn, a reminder that even paradise has its drawbacks, the echo of Bruce Springsteen in a dive bar, a sound that is both comforting and slightly repetitive.

He starts sharing his work online, on a blog called "Exit 8A Echoes," a name that sounds both profound and slightly pretentious. Slowly, people start to listen, mostly out of boredom. They recognize their own stories in his words, or at least vaguely recall hearing something similar somewhere. They find a shared sense of belonging in his lamentations, a belonging that is perhaps born out of shared misery, but belonging nonetheless.

Brenda, surprised, or at least demonstrating a facial expression that might be surprise, says, "B-Rad, you might actually have something here. Or you might just need a nap. It's hard to tell with you."

B-Rad shrugs. A gesture he has perfected over years of working in customer service. He still works at Wawa. The Turnpike still rages. But something has shifted, or perhaps just tilted slightly. He has found his voice, not in lamentation, but in the messy, beautiful, bittersweet symphony of the Garden State Grind, a symphony that is slightly out of tune, but undeniably his. He has found his place in the literary community, or at least in the comments section of his blog. He has found his purpose, which may be as ephemeral as a spilled cup of coffee, but it's a purpose nonetheless. And maybe that's enough. Maybe that's the point. Or maybe not. He's not entirely sure, which, he realizes, is probably the most Jersey thing about him.

La dernière boîte de tartes aux cerises Hostess

Par Babette Chantal Fabron

Elle est arrivée,
enveloppée dans du papier brun,
l'encre de votre nom est tachée
par le long souffle de l'Atlantique.
Douze petites promesses,
rouges comme l'idée qu'un enfant se fait des cerises,
sous cellophane.

Je l'ai posé sur la table de la cuisine,
où la lumière du soleil pénètre encore,
un soleil de janvier,
mince et incertain.
À côté, le vieux saladier de clémentines
et un couteau émoussé par des années
d'années d'épluchage de l'hiver.

J'ai pensé à toi,
tes mains pliant le paquet,
peut-être pendant que la neige époussetait
le toit de ta maison dans l'Ohio.
Qu'est-ce que la distance
qui fait souffrir la douceur ?
Et qu'en est-il de cette boîte à pâtisseries...
ses cerises en dessin animé,
ses lettres anglaises croustillantes,
sa promesse d'Amérique,
enveloppée dans un souvenir

des magasins du coin et
des silences des après-midi d'enfance ?

Ici, à Toulouse,
l'air a un goût de vieille pierre.
Mes voisins étendent le linge dans le froid
comme si le printemps pouvait arriver plus tôt.
La Garonne avance lentement,
un poème que Raimon de Cornet
aurait pu écrire,
s'il avait su
comment les hivers gonflent le cœur
des choses déjà perdues.

Je déballe une tarte,
sa croûte s'écaille dans mes mains.
Le goût sucré est vif,
presque trop.
Les cerises ne sont pas des cerises,
mais quelque chose d'autre...
un fantôme de fruit
conservé dans le sucre,
un souvenir rendu comestible.

Je les mange lentement,
debout à la fenêtre,
je regarde la rue en contrebas.
La vie des autres
se déplacent comme des ombres
dans la faible lumière de l'hiver.
Et je pense aux douze tartes,
maintenant onze,
comme si chacune

était une petite horloge,
faisant tic-tac vers le moment
où elles disparaîtront,
et que je me retrouve à nouveau
avec la boîte vide,
le faible parfum des cerises
dans l'air.

The Last Box of Hostess Cherry Pies

Translation by Soline Cosette Patenaud

It arrived,
wrapped in brown paper,
the ink of your name smudged
by the Atlantic's long breath.
Twelve small promises,
red as a child's idea of cherries,
bedded in cellophane.

I placed it on the kitchen table,
where sunlight still limps in,
a January sun,
thin and uncertain.
Beside it, the old bowl of clementines
and a knife dulled by years
of peeling winter.

I thought of you,
your hands folding the parcel,
perhaps while snow dusted
the roof of your house in Ohio.
What is it about distance
that makes sweetness ache?
And what of this pastry box–
its cartoon cherries,
its crisp English letters,
its promise of America,
wrapped in a memory
of corner stores and

the silences of childhood afternoons?

Here, in Toulouse,
the air tastes of old stone.
My neighbors hang laundry in the cold
as if spring might come early.
The Garonne moves slowly,
a poem Raimon de Cornet
might have written,
had he known
how winters swell the heart
with things already lost.

I unwrap one pie,
its crust flaking in my hands.
The sweetness is sharp,
almost too much.
The cherries are not cherries,
but something else—
a ghost of fruit
preserved in sugar,
a memory made edible.

I eat it slowly,
standing at the window,
watching the street below.
The lives of others
move like shadows
in the weak winter light.
And I think of the twelve pies,
now eleven,
as if each one
were a small clock,

ticking toward a moment
when they are gone,
and I am left again
with the empty box,
the faint scent of cherries
lingering in the air.

The Corgi Cotillion: A Philosophical Pas de Chien

By Lars Benton

When Mabel Duchesne unleashed forty-three corgis swathed in pink taffeta upon the unsuspecting dawn of Sabattus, the local gazette, *The Sabattus Squealer*, didn't even deign to dispatch a shutterbug. This oversight would later haunt them, as it would the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, and, in due course, the Smithsonian Institution, which would eventually dedicate an entire wing to what became known as "The Great Canine Couture Catastrophe."

The dogs surged forth like a pastel tsunami down Route 126, their diminutive limbs piston-pumping beneath frothy layers of tulle and organdy, each frock painstakingly pilfered from the St. Vincent de Paul thrift store's dumpster during seventeen years of nocturnal raids. Mabel, squinting through cataracts under the flickering glow of her battery-powered radio, had tailored each garment with the precision of a French seamstress channeling the ghost of Descartes, who, as we all know, once mused, "I think, therefore I hem."

"Les chiens sont libres," she murmured through the sparse remnants of her dentition, observing the spectacle from beneath the rust-eaten girders of the old B&M Railroad bridge, her residence since the Carter administration. Her cardboard abode was festooned with pages from ancient philosophical treatises she'd unearthed in an abandoned potato cellar—Plato's *Republic* here, a smattering of Montaigne's *Essays* there, all yellowed and curling like the edges of her sanity.

The corgis—each christened after a different French or ancient philosopher—barked in synchronized Socratic dialogue as they trotted past the Dairy Joy. Their collective

discourse, had anyone the wit to decipher it, proclaimed: "The revolution will be accessorized, and possibly syllogized."

Mrs. Pelletier, fumbling to unlock her convenience store, dropped her keyring with a clatter that echoed like the opening salvo of the Peloponnesian War. The sound of forty-three sets of painted toenails clicking against the asphalt filled the morning air like the staccato tapping of a thousand tiny existentialists debating the meaning of life. The dresses, caught in the dawn breeze, billowed like the diaphanous robes of a Platonic ideal, or perhaps a flock of rose-hued jellyfish drifting through the ether of pure reason.

"Descartes," the lead corgi, sported white eyelet with mint green ribbons, her ensemble a sartorial nod to the Cartesian coordinate system. She had been rehearsing this moment for eight years in Mabel's makeshift ballroom beneath the bridge, where hubcaps doubled as mirrors and the drip-drip-drip of water served as a metronome, marking time with the relentless inevitability of Zeno's paradoxes.

By noon, the pack had reached the town common, where they executed an impeccable waltz around the Civil War memorial, their dresses swirling in perfect Euclidean formation. A crowd gathered, first the caffeine-addled regulars from Tim Hortons, then the entire third grade from Sabattus Elementary, and finally, a documentary crew from Paris who had taken a wrong turn en route to L.L. Bean and now found themselves filming what they assumed was a surrealist homage to Rousseau's *Social Contract*.

"Cosmos 954—er, I mean, Voltaire," Mabel muttered, correcting herself as she watched from her bridge, her fingers busy hemming a tiny yellow dress for a corgi she would never own. She flipped through a tattered copy of *Candide*, pausing to underline a passage about the best of all possible worlds, which she suspected might involve more dogs and fewer humans.

The corgis, meanwhile, had moved on to a spirited reenactment of the Symposium, debating the nature of love and beauty through a series of yips and twirls. The documentary crew, now thoroughly convinced they had stumbled upon a canine avant-

garde performance piece, began shouting directions in French, which the dogs ignored with the stoic indifference of a Stoic philosopher contemplating the void.

Back under her bridge, Mabel sipped from a chipped mug of instant coffee and pondered the words of Heraclitus: "You cannot step into the same river twice." She nodded sagely, knowing that the revolution, like the river, belonged to the dogs now. And as the sun dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows over the town common, the corgis danced on, their taffeta rustling like the whispers of a thousand ancient philosophers, debating the eternal question: "Who's a good boy?"

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